



MADHUKISHWAR

Gangster Rule —The Massacre Of The Sikhs

THE communal riots that followed Indira Gandhi's tragic death on October 31 were like the sudden eruption of a gigantic volcano. The ferocity of the explosion took by surprise both the victimised community and the community in whose name the ferocious campaign of looting, arson, killing, burning, rape and molestation took place.

Most observers agree that the violence began as random attacks on individual Sikh men who were pounced upon in public places, on public transport and on the streets on October 31. The events of this day may have been passed off as a spontaneous outburst of anger at the assassination of Indira Gandhi by two Sikh members of her security guard. But what happened over the next three days makes it impossible to dismiss those events as spontaneous expressions of outrage.

The series of attacks on Sikh homes, *gurudwaras* and commercial establishments which began on November 1 seems to have been the work of organised hoodlums who collected large mobs for the looting and killing spree. Very broadly speaking, the attacks can be placed in three categories,

(a) Looting and killing in middle and upper middle class localities, such as Lajpat Nagar, Jangpura, Defence Colony,

Friends Colony, Maharani Bagh, Patel Nagar, Safdarjung Enclave and Punjabi Bagh. Here, houses, *gurudwaras* and shops were looted and burnt, and a large number of vehicles, including buses, trucks, cars and scooters were set ablaze. Some people were injured and others killed. But, on the whole, relatively fewer lives were lost in middle class colonies.

(b) The systematic slaughter and rape that accompanied looting, arson and burning in the resettlement colonies, slums and villages around the city. Most of the death occurred in areas like Trilokpuri, Kalyanpuri, Mangolpuri, Sultanpuri, Nand Nagri, Palam village, Shakurpur, Gamri. Rows of houses and huts were burnt down and hundreds of men and young boys were beaten, stabbed and burnt to death while many women were abducted and raped. A large number of persons are still reported missing by their families. Houses and *gurudwaras* were looted and burnt down.

(c) Sikh men and boys were attacked in the streets, trains, buses, markets and workplaces, and many of them brutally murdered, some of them burnt alive or thrown out of trains. Others escaped with injuries, more or less serious. This kind of attacking seems to have been done at random -any man who looked visibly Sikh was made a target.

Most of the observations in this article are based on several taperecorded interviews with men and women from some trans-Yamuna colonies, especially

Trilokpuri. These were among the worst hit areas in Delhi. Some other observations are based on what I saw happening in our neighbourhood, Lajpat Nagar, and on conversations with our neighbours as well as with friends living in different middle class colonies in the city. The pattern of murder and arson was similar in most parts of Delhi, in as farflung places as Palam village, Mangolpuri, Kalyanpuri, and Bhogal. However, the intensity of violence was far more severe in poorer resettlement colonies than in middle class areas.

Among The Worst Hit

Trilokpuri is one of those resettlement colonies which were brought into existence during the emergency, when Sanjay Gandhi spearheaded slum clearance drives in Delhi. Thousands of families were forcibly evicted from slums and unauthorised colonies in the city. They were transported to areas several miles away from the city proper, and were resettled there. Each evicted family was supposed to be given a small plot measuring 25 square yards, and in some cases also a loan to build a house. Thus were founded these colonies of the city poor who had been evicted from the slums and pavement dwellings where they earlier lived.

Even though, at that time, many people saw the evictions as cruelty inflicted on the city poor, the Congress (I) was able to convert the resettlement colonies into solid support bases and vote banks, because the evicted families slowly began to feel

that their status had been considerably boosted since each of them now owned a piece of land and a *pukka* house, instead of living as formerly in unauthorised structures in slums. Many of the riot victims interviewed, who were amongst the original recipients of land, mentioned that they were very grateful to Indira Gandhi and to her party for this favour.

However, many of those who were given plots of land sold them off, because the resettlement colonies are very far away from the city proper, where most poor people have to come daily to earn a living. Many lower middle class families bought plots of land from the original allottees. Thus, today, the social composition of these colonies provides a rich mixture. For instance, in Trilokpuri, one finds North Indians and South Indians, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs all living cheek by jowl.

The occupations range from petty shopkeeping to business to domestic service to low level government employment to rickshaw pulling, scooter driving, peddling and artisanry. In normal times, there seems to be a good amount of intermingling and friendly feeling between neighbours of different communities, even among those who speak different languages. Yet the feelings about high and low status are also pronounced.

Among Trilokpuri Sikhs, too, there are significant variations. A large number of them, especially those most severely affected by the riots, are known as Labana Sikhs. These are not Punjabi Sikhs. They are migrants from Sikligarh in Sind, now part of Pakistan. They speak either Hindi or their own dialect, which is distinctly different from Punjabi. The traditional occupation of the community is weaving string cots and pounding rice. Few of the men still perform these jobs. Most of them have switched over to other occupations. A number of them drive scooters and pull rickshaws. Some work as porters at different railway stations. Others have taken to working as mechanics, carpenters and construction workers. A few have

been to Gulf countries as skilled labourers.

Even though they do not call themselves Mazhabi Sikhs, they are considered low caste by other Sikhs. Makhan Bai of Trilokpuri summed up the distinction aptly. Referring to urban based Sikhs, most of whom are involved in commerce, she said : “Punjabi Sikhs are Seths. We Labana Sikhs are labourers. Traditionally, we are *charpai* makers.”

Differences are visible even amongst the Labana Sikhs in this colony. Those who have entered some of the newer occupations such as scooter driving or mechanical repair work are relatively better off. They have *pukka* houses and their own plots of land. They are an upwardly

Trilokpuri. The Labana Sikh community seems to have very little connection with Punjab politics. Many of them are traditional Congress (I) supporters. That is one reason why they, like most Sikhs in Delhi, were taken totally unawares by the attack.

Initial Resistance

Far more than 400 people were murdered in Trilokpuri alone. The largest number of deaths has so far been reported from the two blocks of Trilokpuri where the Labana Sikhs were concentrated. This is how Gubar Singh, a resident of block 30, Trilokpuri, describes the events of November 1 : “My house was the first to be burnt in Trilokpuri. I work for a tailor’s



Systematic selective destruction —Sikh houses & vehicles destroyed and burnt

mobile community. Many of them own television sets, taperecorders and other such consumer items. However, those who were not able to move into these new occupations are much poorer. Some of them live in huts constructed illegally in open spaces which are meant to be parks.

Labana Sikhs live together in clusters in blocks 30 and 32 of Trilokpuri. There are also some families scattered in other blocks. Labana Sikhs have a separate small *gurudwara* of their own. There is also a big *gurudwara* adjoining the main road in

shop. I bring the material from the shop every morning and stitch the garments at home. On the 31st, when I was on my way back from the shop, I heard rumours that Indira Gandhi had died. But no one stopped me or tried to hurt me. I never imagined that such a thing could happen to me. None of us was really prepared for what happened the next day.

“At about 10 a.m. on November 1, we heard a lot of noise and shouting. We climbed on the roofs of our houses to see what was happening. We saw smoke rising

from Noida colony and then we smelt human flesh burning. In the meantime, we heard people say that the mob, having set fire to the main *gurudwara*, was now coming to burn our Labana Sikh *gurudwara*. So we rushed and got together whatever weapons we had, and tried to save the *gurudwara*. But even when the *gurudwara* was attacked, we thought there would be fighting for a short while, and then the police would come and stop it. We never thought things would go so far. There has been no atmosphere of conflict between Hindus and Sikhs in Trilokpuri.

“Several men from our block went and hid in other lanes nearby. So we were not more than 500 men left to defend the whole block as well as the *gurudwara*. About 50 of us stood on each side of the streets in our block. The attackers came in a mob about 4,000 strong, and began an attack on the *gurudwara*. They were armed with *lathis*. They began throwing bricks and stones at us. We also stoned them. See, my fingers are cut with throwing bricks. Many of us got hurt. Heads were split open. The attackers far outnumbered us. Gradually, we had to give up. They advanced and we began to retreat into our houses. They set fire to the *gurudwara*.”

Defenders Scattered

“Then they began to attack our houses. We ran from one house to another, trying to save ourselves. They broke into each house and carried away all our possessions on *thelas*. There were about four policemen watching this looting campaign. They told us to put down our swords and not to worry. They said: ‘Nothing will happen to you.’ Then they went away and left us to be killed.”

Sajan Singh from block 32 adds that the attackers had three guns. The police kept telling the Sikhs to go into their houses and assuring them that peace would be restored. “We believed the police and we went in. That is how they got us killed.” He accuses the SHO of the area, one Tyagi, of having actively encouraged the attackers. Many others of the area also

testify that they heard Tyagi tell the attackers: “You have three days to kill them. Do your job well. Do not leave a single man alive, otherwise I will have to suffer.”

Once the attempt at group defence was broken down, they were in a much more vulnerable position. Each man ran desperately to find for himself a hiding place from the mob. Gulzar Singh continued his narrative: “By the evening of the 1st, some peace was restored. The attackers left. They threatened that they would return the next day and would take away the women. Several men died on the 1st. About half a dozen died in my presence. The attackers hit them with *lathis* and *khurpis*. They also managed to snatch some of our *kirpans* and stabbed some of us with them. When they were looting and burning my house, they laid hands on me. They burnt part of my hair and cut part of it before I managed to break free.”

Seeking Hiding Places

“I saved myself by hiding in my brother’s house which is in a Hindu street. For one day and two nights, my brother and I hid under a double bed. On the 2nd, a group of men came and began to search each house for Sardars. My wife says three men were caught and killed in the neighbouring house. The attackers turned everyone out of the house and searched it. We were hiding behind boxes and bags under the bed. They kicked the boxes and thought there was no one there. Another minute and we would have been finished.

“On the 3rd, the military came and my wife told them to rescue us. That is how we reached the relief camp. One of my brothers was found by the attackers and killed on the 2nd. They threw him down from the roof of his house and broke his spine. Then they burnt him alive. Many women were molested and abducted. I saw a jeepload of women being carried away to village Chilla in the presence of their families.”

Most others who survived had been through similar experiences. The attackers would kill every Sikh male in sight, would leave for a while, but would return again

to search Sikh houses and neighbours’ houses to finish off those men who were still in hiding.

Sajan Singh, who works as a porter at Nizamuddin railway station, and lives in block 32, Trilokpuri, was also a victim of the clashes. He saved himself by hiding in his house, in a small aperture where cowdung cakes used to be stored for fuel. The attackers came in repeated waves into his house and looted everything they could find. He says he had Rs 12,000 in cash, a television set, a radio, a taperecorder, utensils, eight quilts, blankets and other household goods, many of which were being stored up as dowries for his four daughters. At night, the attackers came with torches to search for men who were still hiding. Sajan got his children to bring him a pair of scissors and a stick. He cut off his long hair and beard while he was hiding under the cowdung cakes. Then, he says : “When the next wave came, I picked up a stick and mingled with the mob. All night, I shouted anti Sikh slogans like ‘Kill the Sardars.’ That is how I saved myself. At 6 a.m., I somehow managed to slip away and came to Nizamuddin railway station. There, the other porters gave me shelter and consoled me. I did not know what had befallen my family. On the 6th, I came to Farash Bazar relief camp and found them there. My sister has been raped. The other women and children are safe.”

Many of these one sided battles continued for hours on end. The woman neighbour of a victimised family in Shakurpur described the attack : “The mob came here on 31st night, and the fighting continued till the 2nd. The terror began on the 31st. The attackers began by stopping vehicles to check if there were Sikhs in them. Electricity failed in this area, in the houses as well as on the streets. The extreme darkness at night heightened the terror. The attacks on houses and *gurudwaras* started around 9.30 a.m. on the 1st. They came and started stoning the house of our neighbour, Santokh Singh. The family stayed quiet inside the

house. The crowd wanted to enter the house but was hesitant, afraid of possible resistance. People are generally afraid of Sikhs, you know. Finally, one of the men tried to break into the house. The men of the family hit him with a sword and his hand got slightly cut. This frightened the crowd and they retreated for a while. Then they slowly collected more men and returned. Now they were about a 1,000 men. They dragged some furniture and wood that was lying in Santokh Singh's courtyard, piled it up around the house, and set the house on fire. Then, the four men of the family came out with swords in their hands. The attackers immediately ran away. They did not want to take any risk. They were armed only with *lathis* and kerosene. But they soon advanced again and started stoning the house from all sides. The house was now burning. The four men of the family ran for their lives. One went to the house of a neighbour who cut his hair, gave him shelter and later smuggled him out of the colony. The youngest son was pounced upon on the road, hit with *lathis* and burnt to death. Another son is missing. Most probably, he was murdered by the same group. We do not know what happened to him. After some time the police came and took away the old father and the women to a camp. They have not yet arrested anyone."

So murderous were the attacks throughout the city that most of the men who fell into the hands of the mob did not survive. The number of injured men was very small in comparison to the numbers killed. Many others were less fortunate. One old man, Gurcharan Singh, also from block 32, lost all the three young men of his family. He had only one son, aged about 17, and two nephews, aged 20 and 22. All four men stayed in hiding for two days and one night. Finally, the door of the house was broken open. The four men had already clipped their beards and cut off their long hair. They came out and pleaded to be spared now that they were like Hindus. But the rioters caught hold of

the three young men, threw them on their own string beds, covered them with mattresses and quilts, then poured kerosene over them and set them on fire in Gurcharan Singh's presence. Gurcharan Singh was beaten up. He and his aged wife, who is a TB patient, are in the relief camp, despairing over the loss of their three sons, and destitute.

Deliberate, Unhurried Murder Squads

Most people in Trilokpuri said though their immediate neighbours were not amongst the attackers, a fair number of rioters were from other parts of the same colony. They identified these men as



Some of the widowed women at Shivpuri police station camp

chamars, sansis, Musalmans and gujjars. The last named had been specially brought in for the attack that morning from Chilla, an adjoining village, they said.

Many eyewitnesses confirm that the attackers were not so much a frenzied mob as a set of men who had a task to perform and went about it in an unhurried manner, as if certain that they need not fear intervention by the police or anyone else. When their initial attacks were repulsed, they retired temporarily but returned again and again in waves until they had done exactly what they meant to do -killed the men and boys, raped women, looted property and burnt houses.

This is noteworthy because in ordinary, more spontaneous riots, the number of people injured is usually

observed to be far higher than the number killed. The nature of the attack confirms that there was a deliberate plan to kill as many Sikh men as possible, hence nothing was left to chance. That also explains why in almost all cases, after hitting or stabbing, the victims were doused with kerosene or petrol and burnt, so as to leave no possibility of their surviving.

Between October 31 and November 4, more than 2,500 men were murdered in different parts of Delhi, according to several careful unofficial estimates.

What Happened To Women

There have been very few cases of women being killed except when they got trapped in houses which were set on fire. Almost all the women interviewed described how men and young boys were special targets. They were dragged out of the houses, attacked with stones and rods, and set on fire. In Trilokpuri, many women said that once the attack on individual homes started, the attackers did not allow any women to remain inside their own homes. The attackers wanted to prevent the women from helping the men to hide or providing assistance to those who were in hiding. Throughout this period, many of the women were on the streets.

When women tried to protect the men of their families, they were given a few, blows and forcibly separated from, the men. Even when they clung to men, trying to save them, they were hardly ever attacked the way men were. I have not yet heard of a case of a woman being assaulted and then burnt to death by the mob. However, many women were injured when they tried to intervene and protect the men, or in the course of molestation and rape. A number of women and girls also died when the gangs burnt down their houses while they remained inside.

This is somewhat unusual. For instance, when dalits in villages are burnt and attacked, women are prominent among the victims. When I asked why the killing was so selective, I got a uniform answer from most people interviewed : "They wanted to wipe out the men so that families

would be left without earning members. Also, now they need not fear retaliation even if we have to go back and live in the same colony.” Though this may not provide a complete explanation, the effect has been exactly that which the women describe.

In many cases, families tried to save adolescent and little boys by dressing them up as girls and tying their hair in loose hanging plaits. Sometimes, neighbours pointed out these disguised boys to the attackers. When such boys were caught, they were, pounced upon by the crowd and set on fire. However, a few, especially very young ones, did manage to escape death by assuming this guise.

Sukhpal Singh is one of the few older boys of Trilokpuri who was able to escape by dressing as a girl even though he is 15 years old. His family lives in block 19 but on that fateful morning, his parents sent him to his sister’s house in block 30 because they felt he would be safer in the latter area where Sikhs lived together in a large cluster. Sukhpal’s brother-in-law sought shelter in a Sikh house but he was turned out. The mob caught him on the second floor of a house, threw him down and burnt him alive. Sukhpal Singh’s sister dressed him up in girl’s clothes and braided his long hair like that of a girl. Somehow, he managed to escape attention and discovery.

In most camps, there is a disproportionately large number of women and children. Among boys, most of those who managed to escape were little ones. According to figures collected by Nagrik Ekta Manch volunteer Jaya Jaitley, out of about 539 families housed in Farash Bazar camp, there are 210 widows. Families which have lost all adult male members are the ones most afraid of going back to the colonies where they formerly lived. Most do not want to go back even to claim their plots of land, and would rather be settled elsewhere.

Even though most women were not brutally murdered as were men, they were subjected to other forms of torture, terror

and humiliation. This part of the story also makes familiar reading for anyone who has gone through accounts of riots, communal clashes and wars.

Gurdip Kaur, a 45 year old woman from block 32, Trilokpuri, told a typical story.



Sukhpal Singh

Her husband and three sons were brutally murdered in front of her. Her husband used to run a small shop in the locality. Her eldest son, Bhajan Singh, worked in the railway station, the second in a radio repair shop and the third as a scooter driver. She says : “On the morning of November 1, when Indira Mata’s body was brought to Tin Murti, everyone was watching the television. Since 8 a.m., they were showing the homage being paid to her dead body. At about noon, my children said: ‘Mother, please make some food. We are hungry.’ I had not cooked that day and I told them : ‘Son, everyone is mourning. She was our mother, too. She helped us to settle here. So I don’t feel like lighting the fire today.’ Soon after this, the attack started. Three of the men ran out and were set on fire. My youngest son stayed in the house with me. He shaved off his beard and cut his hair. But they came into the house. Those young boys, 14 and 16 year olds, began to drag my son out even though he was

hiding behind me. They tore my clothes and stripped me naked in front of my son. When these young boys began to rape me, my son began to cry and said: ‘Elder brothers, don’t do this. She is like your mother just as she is my mother.’ But they raped me right there, in front of my son, in my own house. They were young boys, maybe eight of them. When one of them raped me, I said : ‘My child, never mind. Do what you like. But remember, I have given birth to children. This child came into the world by this same path.’”

“After they had taken my honour, they left. I took my son out with me and made him sit among the women but they came and dragged him away. They took him to the street corner, hit him with *lathis*, sprinkled kerosene over him, and burnt him alive. I tried to save him but they struck me with knives and broke my arm. At that time, I was completely naked, I had managed to get hold of an old sheet which I had wrapped around myself. If I had had even one piece of clothing on my body, I would have gone and thrown myself over my son and tried to save him. I would have done anything to save at least one young man of my family. Not one of the four is left.”

According to her, hardly any woman in her neighbourhood was spared the humiliation she underwent. She said even nine to 10 year old girls were raped. She was an eyewitness to many such rapes. The attackers first emptied the houses of men who were burnt alive. After that, they dragged the women inside the ransacked houses and gang raped them. Not many women would openly admit this fact because, as Gurdip Kaur says : “The unmarried girls will have to stay unmarried all their lives if they admit that they have been dishonoured. No one would marry such a girl.” Therefore, most families do not openly acknowledge the fact.

This led me to ask Gurdip Kaur why she had come forward to narrate her experience. I also asked whether she wanted me to publish her statement. She categorically said she wanted her

statement to be published : “Those women in whose homes there is one or more surviving men cannot make a public statement because they will be dishonouring those men. I have no one left (meaning no male member). My daughter has also been widowed. She has two children. My daughter-in-law, who has three children, has also been widowed. Another daughter-in-law was married only one and a half months ago and has also been widowed. I have nothing left. That is why I want to give my statement.”

In fact, many other families whose adult men had all been killed similarly felt that there was “no one left in the family.” At times, when people said that all their children (*bachey*) had been killed, they were actually referring only to their sons. I had to specifically enquire about surviving daughters, whose lives were not counted in the same way.

Indra Bai narrates : “At about 4 p.m., after they had murdered all the Sikh men they could get hold of in our block, they asked the women to come out of the houses. They said : ‘Now your men are dead. Come out and sit together or else we will kill you too.’

“We women all huddled together and they offered us some water. As we were drinking water, they began dragging off whichever girl they liked. Each girl was taken away by a gang of 10 or 12 boys, many of them in their teens. They would take her to the nearby *masjid*, gang rape her, and send her back after a few hours. Some never returned. Those who returned were in a pitiable condition and without a stitch of clothing. One young girl said 15 men had climbed on her.”

Gurdip Kaur and many other women from Trilokpuri whom I interviewed at Balasaheb *gurudwara* and at Farash Bazar camp also talked about several women who had been abducted by gangsters and taken to Chilla village which is dominated by gujjars, some of whom are alleged to have led the attacking gangs. On November 3, the military brought some of these women

back from Chilla. But many of them were untraceable at the time I interviewed these families. They were very worried that these women had either been murdered or were still being held captive.

Rajjo Bai, another old woman from the same neighbourhood, who had sought shelter in Balasabeb *gurudwara* in Ashram, had a similar tale to tell. Two of her sons were killed in her presence. One who was hiding in a hut is still missing. All three sons were rickshaw pullers. She got separated from her two daughters-in-law who were probably abducted. The daughters-in-law were found much later at the Farash Bazar camp but Rajjo’s 24 year old daughter, who had had to be left behind in the house because she was disabled, could not be traced.

Nanki Bai, also from Trilokpuri was distraught when she asked us to look for her daughter, Koshala Bai, who had been snatched away from her. She says : “All night, the attacks continued. My husband was hiding in a trunk. They dragged him out and cut him to pieces. Another 16 year old boy was killed in front of my eyes. He was carrying a small child in his arms. They



Babybai

killed the child too.

“We women were forced to come out of our houses and sit in a group outside. I was trying to hide my daughter. I put a child in her lap and dishevelled her hair so that she would look older. But finally one of our own neighbours pointed her out to these men. They began to drag her away. We tried to save her. I pleaded with them.

My son came in the way and they hit him with a sword. He lost his finger. I could not even look at his hand. I just wrapped it in my veil.

“They took Koshala to the *masjid*. I don’t know what happened to her. At about 4 a.m., when we were driven out of the colony, she called out to me from the roof of the *masjid*. She was screaming to me : ‘Mummy, mujhe le chal, mujhe le chal, Mummy.’ (take me with you). But how could Mummy take her ? They beat her because she called to me. I don’t know where she is now.”

Later, I met Koshala in the Farash Bazar camp and told her that her mother was in Balasaheb *gurudwara*. She confirmed her mother’s account and added that her father’s eyes had been gouged out before he was killed. But she did not say that she had been raped. She merely said : “They slapped me and beat me and struck me with a knife. They tore up my clothes.”

The rapists made no distinction between old and young women. In Nand Nagri, an 80 year old women informed a social worker that she had been raped. In Trilokpuri, several cases were reported of old women who were gang raped in front of their family members. As in all such situations, the major purpose of these rapes seems to have been to inflict humiliation and to destroy the victims’ morale even more completely.

Manchi Devi, about 55, says she was gang raped. Four men of her family, including her son-in-law and her nephew, were murdered. “When I tried to intervene to save the children, several of those men grabbed me. Some tore my clothes, some climbed on top of me. What can I tell you, sister ? Some raped me, some bit me all over my body, and some tore off my clothes. All this happened around 11p.m. in my own house. I don’t know how many men there were. The whole house was full of them. About a dozen raped me. After that, they caught hold of some young girls outside. My old husband and one nine year old son are the only ones left in my family. Whom shall I depend on in my old

age ? What can this nine year old do?"

Most of these rapes took place while the bodies of the husbands, sons or brothers of these women were still smouldering in their presence, and their homes had thus been converted into cremation grounds. Baby Bai, a young bride, aged around 20, was also gang raped. She was married barely a year ago. Her husband was a rickshaw puller, and sometimes worked as a scooter driver.

She says : "There were six members in our family. The three men, my husband and my two brothers-in-law, were murdered. Now only three women are left. Our house was attacked at about 4 p.m. and the fighting continued until next morning. My husband was first beaten and then burnt to death, I was sitting and crying when a big group of men came and dragged me away. They took me to the nearby huts in front of block 32, and raped me. They tore off all my clothes. They bit and scratched me. They took me at 10 p.m. and released me at about 3 a.m. When I came back, I was absolutely naked, just as one is when one comes out of the mother's womb. They took away all my jewellery-ear rings, a gold chain, bangles, nose ring and anklets. They left without giving me anything to cover myself. On the road, I found someone's old sheet. I wrapped myself in it and walked up to Chilla village. There, I borrowed some clothes from my relatives."

Pyari Bai, aged about 70, has also lost all the male members of her family-three sons, a grandson, two sons-in-law and two nephews. Most of the men in her family used to weave string beds for a living and one was a rickshaw puller. Her daughter-in-law, who is several months' pregnant, was dragged inside the house and raped. Pyari Bai too says that not even old women or little girls were spared.

Even though it was widely known that these attacks had been going on unabated since November 1, the government neither provided the victims with any physical protection nor made any arrangements for them to be evacuated until much after the worst was over.



— Madhu

Pyari Bai with her daughters-in-law

Women Silenced

Most of the women, especially those who had some surviving male members in their family, were not willing to say they had been raped although most of them did talk about women in general having been abducted and raped. They were pressured into staying silent about their personal experience not merely by the threat of social ostracism within their own community such as being abandoned by husbands or not finding husbands if unmarried; other outside pressures played an important role, too.

Gurdip Kaur narrated how the raped women in Farash Bazar camp were prevented from even getting a routine medical examination and registering a complaint. A few women did come forward to get cases registered. Some of the doctors of the medical relief team also confirmed that several such women had come to them, but since rape cases are considered medico-legal cases for which special evidentiary procedures have to be followed, the women had to be referred to a hospital by the government administration doctor who was posted at the camp. This, however, did not happen.

Gurdip Kaur said: "Most of the women who went to register a case were young, unmarried women. Four of them were sent into the doctor's room. I was asked to wait outside. The women who went inside were intimidated by those in charge and were warned not to undergo the medical

examination. They were told that hands would be shoved up their vaginas and much else would be done to them. They, being young, inexperienced women, got frightened, and did not insist on a medical examination." Gurdip Kaur regrets that she was not allowed to be with them and encourage them. Hence no case was registered.

Gurdip Kaur says she heard that H.K.L. Bhagat was coming to Farash Bazar camp. She tried to give him her statement but she could not meet him.

The physical violence that these women experienced is going to be buried in their hearts as their own "shame." Several men of their community who were living in the camp talked to me of these "dis-honoured" women, who had been forced to do a "wrong action" and whose lives were now worthless. Thus, it seems to me very unlikely that they will be treated even by their own community with any measure of the sympathy and understanding that the male victims of violence received.

Women Left Destitute

In Trilokpuri, very few Sikh women work for a wage. Thus, the families are left with no male members and are also without wage earners. Widowed women constitute the most vulnerable group amongst the surviving victims of the carnage. Many of them are illiterate or barely literate. Few have any skills at all. Very few have ever worked outside the house. Most of the

women have several young children so that going out of the house for long hours to earn a living may not be feasible.

Thakari Bai, who is in her early twenties, is typical of such women. Her husband worked as a *coolie* at the railway station and earned more than Rs 50 a day. She has three daughters, aged seven years, three years, and two months. One of them is disabled and retarded. In tears, she told us that her three brothers-in-law, who managed to survive by cutting their hair and hiding, now do not wish to support her. Already, they and their families have begun to ill treat her and quarrel with her, because they fear that she and her daughters will become a burden on them. She says her widowed mother, who lives in a Rajasthan village, is very poor. Her mother works as a labourer and often has not enough to eat. So Thakari Bai does not know where she will go if the relief camp forces her out without some means of livelihood and accommodation being provided to her.

Several relief workers reported that fierce tensions had sprung up between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law over the question of who should receive the Rs 10,000 promised by government as compensation for a dead man who was the son of one woman and husband of the other. Given the fact that neither wives nor mothers have any independent sources of income and all can only look forward to destitution, the conflict appears to be inevitable.

One Way Battle

Much has been made of the so called provocation offered by Sikhs who came out with swords and *kirpans*, as at the Trilokpuri *gurudwara*. But all available eyewitness accounts confirm that swords, if used at all, were used as a desperate measure of self defence, when no other help was available. Either the police was not present or if it was present it was playing the role of passive onlooker or active abettor.

We would also do well to remember that the Indian Penal Code gives citizens the

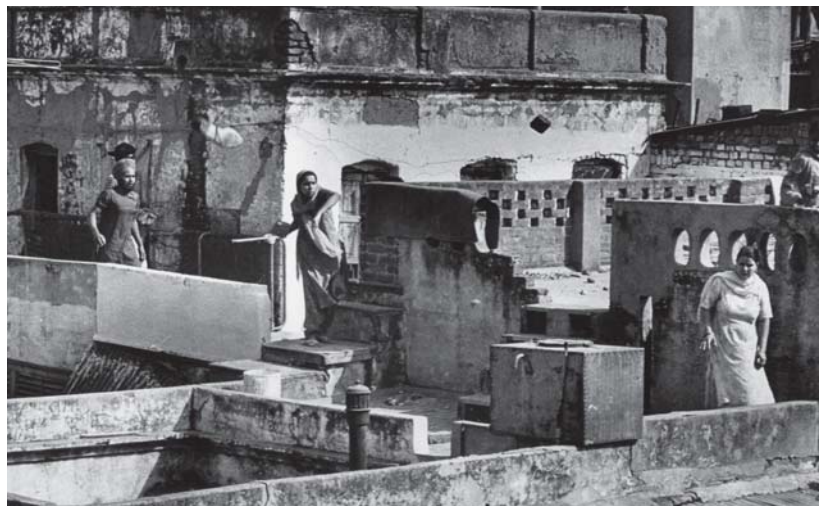
right to use weapons in private self defence of their lives and property against illegal attack, and specifically lays down that if in the course of such defence, even innocent people happen to get killed, the persons engaged in self defence are not culpable for the deaths.

Moreover, in many places, no defence whatsoever was offered, yet *gurudwaras* and homes did not escape destruction. For instance, Vasan Singh of East Vinod Nagar, another trans Yamuna colony, described how his neighbourhood was attacked. He said that on November 1, at about 10 a.m., truckloads of men from nearby villages were on their way to Delhi. They were shouting anti Sikh slogans. Some of them came down the highway and burnt the

set afloat, ever since Bhindranwale's terrorist squads shot into prominence, about the "enormous supplies" of arms that have been accumulated by the Sikh community, the facts that came to light from the accounts of the four days of violence are quite contrary to most popular prejudices. Very few Sikhs had any arms to speak of. Even the major *gurudwaras* in Delhi which were strongly suspected of being arsenals, had to give in to the attackers without much of a fight. There were hardly any non Sikhs among those killed.

How And Why Did It Happen ?

An explanation frequently offered for the massacres is that anger and resentment against the Sikhs had been



A Sikh family in Paharganj whose house is being stoned by the mob taking refuge on the rooftop while some neighbours watch

gurudwara which is near the main road. None of the Sikhs in the colony dared go to the defence of the *gurudwara*. The police was present at this time, but remained inactive. The mob next went to the house of Niranjn Singh, a postmaster. They beat up the family, burnt the house, and burnt several members of the family including children.

Vasan Singh goes on : "We went and hid in the house of a Hindu neighbour. Every Sikh ran and sought shelter in Hindu homes but very few could save their lives."

Despite all the rumours that have been

brewing ever since Bhindranwale's gang began the indiscriminate murder of Hindus in Punjab, in pursuance of their demand for Khalistan, a separate nation state for Sikhs, which might involve a forcible mass exodus of Hindus from Punjab, similar to that which took place from various areas when Pakistan came into existence.

There is no denying that the manner in which the demand for Khalistan was being pursued in the last two years or so had created a good deal of resentment against Bhindranwale among Hindus both in Punjab and outside. But the fact that one

small gang of terrorists who happened to be Sikhs killed some Hindus and Sikhs in Punjab is no reason for thousands of Sikhs all over India who had nothing to do with the Punjab killings to be massacred.

Today, there seems to be a widespread belief, based on the desire to justify the recent riots, that Bhindranwale and his men killed Hindus only. But the fact which is, and ought to be, well known, is that Bhindranwale's men killed Sikhs who opposed them with even greater fervour than they did Hindus. In fact, Bhindranwale began, as do most terrorist groups, by hitting out at those members of his own community who opposed him. This was done with the intention of terrorising his own community into silent submission. Yet this fact is meticulously ignored because it does not help fan the fires of communalism.

Further, the sudden eruption of violence against Sikhs seems quite out of proportion to and inexplicable by the extent of anger amongst Hindus. It is noteworthy that throughout the period when Sikhs, Nirankaris and Hindus were being killed in Punjab, there had been no retaliation whatsoever against Sikhs in Delhi or in other states. Even when some sections of the Akalis organised fairly aggressive processions in Delhi, no political group or set of Hindu militants reacted with violence or even as much as tried to obstruct the processions and rallies. The only clashes that occurred were with the police and the administrative machinery. There were no attacks on *gurudwaras* or even on the homes of prominent Sikh or Akali leaders. It is even more noteworthy that in Punjab, apart from select killings by small organised gangs of terrorists, there were no communal riots throughout the Bhindranwale period.

Hindus and Sikhs do not have a long history or tradition of conflict. The two communities not only share a common past and, a common culture but even today, most Sikh families have Hindu relatives because it used to be a common practice for some Hindu parents in certain areas of

Punjab to dedicate one son to the guru as a Sikh.

Even today, marriages between Sikhs and Hindus are considered a normal practice. Many Hindus routinely visit *gurudwaras* and read the Granth Saheb with much devotion. The fact that all Punjabis use the word *mona* to indicate either a Hindu or a clean shaven Sikh shows that no rigid distinctions have been set up by the people of the two communities between themselves.

Many have tried to justify the violence by asserting that Sikhs "provoked" an attack on themselves by celebrating Indira Gandhi's death. They are supposed to have distributed sweets at home and champagne abroad as soon as they got the news.

During these days, I have met hundreds of people who talk authoritatively about the distribution of sweets by Sikhs in celebration of Indira Gandhi's death, but when questioned, not one of them could say that he or she saw this happen.

However, the most important point we need to remember is what Dharma Kumar said in her article in the *Times of India*: "If all the sweets in India had been distributed -that would not have justified the burning alive of one single Sikh."

Nevertheless, there is very little evidence that, barring a few stray cases, Sikhs in general "rejoiced" at Mrs Gandhi's death. For instance, the reality behind the rumour that Sikh students of Khalsa college, Delhi university, danced the *bhangra* is a fairly typical example of how facts are distorted beyond recognition in an attempt to provide some kind of justification for the terror and killings. These students had been practising *bhangra* every day on their college lawn for over a month prior to Mrs Gandhi's death. They were preparing the dance as an item for the forthcoming winter festivals that are held in every college. On October 31, they were practising as usual and stopped as soon as they got the news.

A friend tried to investigate the source

of another rumour that a wealthy Sikh family in Janakpuri had distributed sweets and dry fruit soon after Mrs Gandhi's death. They discovered that there had indeed been some distribution of sweets. This was done in honour of the coming Gurmurb. Traditionally, about 10 days before Guru Nanak's birthday, which fell on November 8 this year, *prabhat pheris* are organised in each area, and it is customary for families to entertain the *pheri* participants with sweets and other refreshments.

Surely, it was not only Sikhs who could be accused of not cancelling a routine ritual celebration such as this one after they heard of Mrs Gandhi's death. The night of the 31st, when I was walking down the main road in our locality, I saw a wedding procession marching along in full pomp and show, complete with band music, dancing and lights. Nobody showed any concern that this Hindu wedding procession was going through the normal ritual.

In our own neighbourhood, where at least half the families are Sikh, I saw no sign of celebration or distribution of sweets. In fact, even on the morning of the 31st, when the news of the assassination came, I was really surprised to see everyone, both Hindu and Sikh, going about their business without any apparent sign of grief or frenzy. No one I talked to cried or broke down when discussing the news even though most people felt sad that her life had ended so tragically.

Other rumour mongers point to the fact that many Sikhs did not celebrate Diwali this year because they were mourning the army operation and the killing of Bhindranwale and other Sikhs in the golden temple in June. This is cited as proof that they are "antinational" and hence it is assumed that they must have rejoiced at Mrs Gandhi's death.

First, it is not true that no Sikh celebrated Diwali. Some of the victims mentioned that new clothes and utensils bought by them for Diwali were destroyed in the attacks on their homes. Further, the

argument itself is based on bizarre logic of the kind that our government very often uses. It is made out that anyone who does not support every action and policy of the government automatically becomes an enemy of the nation. This way of thinking is based on authoritarian ideology which seeks to deny the people the right to differ with the rulers and the light to mourn the tragic consequences of the rulers actions.

Another thing that is held against the Sikhs is that they felt outraged at the entry of the army into the Golden Temple. To say that all those who felt grieved at the desecration of the Temple were desirous of Indira Gandhi's assassination is a bizarre falsehood. Many of those who were attacked, beaten and murdered were longstanding supporters of the Congress (I). Many men in relief camps talked about how they had worked for the Congress (I) party in previous elections. In some of the burnt down houses, I saw pictures of Indira Gandhi still hanging on the walls. Her pictures also adorn the walls of many Sikh homes in our neighbourhood, and continue to do so even after the riots.

More important is the fact that the group of Sikhs who bore the main brunt of violence were those living in resettlement colonies. This group had very little connection with Punjab extremist politics. In fact, many of them have no connection at all with Punjab.

The most popular of all justifications offered is that the violence was the result of mob fury at the brutal assassination of India's foremost leader at the hands of two Sikhs.

As far as the theory of people's frenzied outrage at Indira Gandhi's death is concerned, one would have been compelled to take it seriously had the riots remained sporadic, unorganised and spontaneous. From the information so far available in Delhi, one is left in no doubt that the whole affair was masterminded and well organised, and that the killers and looters seemed to be pretty confident that no harm would come to them. They seemed to be in



— Bhawan Singh, India Today

Not grief but goondaism. Arson and looting of Sikh shops on Deshbandhu Gupta Marg

no hurry. They came, went back, came again and again. Each time, they returned with reinforcements.

Those who saw the mobs did not get the impression of a group of people angry or in anguish but of a bunch of hoodlums who seemed to be having a good time, fun and games. On November 1, I confronted one mob in Lajpat Nagar. Around noon, when we heard that the local *gurudwara* had been set on fire, three of us women rushed to the spot and tried to persuade the neighbours to help extinguish the fire. At once, we were surrounded by hostile men while women jeered at and abused us from a distance. One or two women even came up and called us names for being so shameless as to argue with men on the streets. At the same time, a crowd of about 200 men came, shouting slogans about revenge. Looking at them laughing, jeering, catcalling, one did not get the impression of any grief whatsoever. All one saw was a hoodlum's delight in demonstrating his power. The jeering mob told us that if we did not keep quiet and get lost, they would throw us into the fire.

The fact that all over the city the attacks started simultaneously and the pattern of violence was identical indicates that this was no spontaneous outburst. Victims from different parts of the city say

that the first organised attacks in residential areas began between 9 and 10a.m. on November 1. Almost everywhere, the attackers came armed with *lathis*, a few knives and kerosene. There seem to have been few instances of the use of revolvers to kill. Almost everywhere, males were singled out and slaughtered. A fairly standard method of killing was adopted all over the city and in fact, in almost all the towns where riots took place. The victim would be stunned with *lathi* blows or stabbed. Kerosene or petrol or diesel would then be poured over him and he would be set on fire while he was still alive. Very few of the burn victims seem to have survived.

An eyewitness account of some of the happenings outside AIIMS gives us a clue about the genesis of the murderous slogan : "*Khun ka badla khun se Ienge*" (We will avenge blood with blood) that was chanted by the groups of killers throughout Delhi, beginning on October 31 : "I was outside AIIMS between 1.30 and 5 p.m. on October 31. There was a large crowd gathered there but it had no resemblance to a frenzied mob. At about 2 p.m., two truck loads of men from neighbouring villages were brought to AIIMS. They dismounted from the trucks in a calm and orderly fashion. They behaved like soldiers waiting for orders.

"The trucks were followed by a tempo full of *lathis* and iron rods. There were no men in the tempo besides the driver. At about 3 p.m., a Congress corporator from the trans Yamuna area addressed the gathering. Later information has confirmed that he is one of those who masterminded the riots in the trans Yamuna area. He gave a fiery speech. There was a lot of drama and slogan shouting during his speech. He was the first to raise the slogan : *khun ka badla khun se lenge.*' From that moment, it became a popular chant. The first victim of their wrath was a Sikh SHO from Vinay Nagar police station who came to the hospital on his motor bike. He was attacked with rods and was rescued with difficulty by senior police officers. This, in my view, was the first attack on a Sikh in Delhi, and it was instigated when the mob took their cue from the Congress leader. From the AIIMS this gang soon went in different directions-towards Naoraji Nagar, INA market, Yusuf Sarai and South Extension. They began to stop all vehicles driven by Sikhs. They beat up the Sikhs and burnt the vehicles. Some Sikhs were burnt to death. Sikh shops in these areas were looted and burnt."

A vast number of investigative reports in newspapers and victims' accounts have pointed out that high officials of the Congress (I) masterminded the whole operation. They rounded up antisocial elements from their constituencies. These elements routinely receive Congress (I) patronage. On this occasion, they were incited to kill, rape, loot and burn, and were assured that no one would interfere with them.

The populous resettlement colonies and the UP and Haryana villages around Delhi have been meticulously cultivated as vote banks and political bases by the Congress (I) throughout the last decade. It is from these areas that truckloads of men are routinely mobilised for Congress (I) rallies and processions. These professional processionists have become habituated to hiring out their services to the ruling party. The gang leaders are on

the regular payroll of the party. That is how Congress (I) leaders could, in a matter of hours, mobilise thousands of hoodlums for the orgy of violence which they organised. Among the most active participants in the gangs were young boys, many in their early teens, who can easily be mobilised.

It is significant that reports confirm that jats, gujjars, scheduled caste men and poor Muslims constituted the bulk of the attacking mobs. This identical pattern has been reported from areas of Delhi that are many kilometres apart.

Many victims have alleged that Congress (I) men used voters' lists and ration shop records to supply the attackers with addresses of Sikh families in each locality. So pre-planned was the whole operation that the attackers not only had prior knowledge of which houses and shops belonged to Sikhs but also seem to have known which Sikh homeowners had Hindu tenants and which Hindu homeowners had Sikh tenants. Such houses were handled differently from those inhabited by Sikhs only. Instead of the whole house being burnt, only the Sikhs were killed and their possessions looted so that the Hindus in the house were left unscathed.

Many prominent leaders have been named in several newspapers as having

instigated riots. The PUCL-PUDR investigative report "*Who Are The Guilty*" mentions H K.L. Bhagat, Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting; Sajjan Kumar, Congress (I) MP from Monopolpuri, who is reported to have paid Rs 100 and a bottle of liquor to each man involved in the killings; Lalit Maken, Congress (I) trade union leader and metropolitan councillor, who is also alleged to have paid Rs 100 and a bottle of liquor to rioters, and who was seen actively instigating arsonists; Dharam Das Shastri, Congress (I) MP from Karol Bagh; Jagdish Tytler, Congress (I) MP; Dr. Ashok Kumar, member of the municipal corporation, Kalyanpuri; Jagdish Chandra Tokas, member of the municipal corporation; Ishwar Singh, corporator; Faiz Mohammad, Youth Congress (I) leader; Satbir Singh of the Youth Congress (I), and many others, along with the lower level local Congress (I) ruffians and hoodlums, as having led many of the mobs.

In Naoraji Nagar market, an eyewitness saw the Youth Congress (I) office bearer, Pravin Sharma, stand in front of a Sikh shop and personally direct the looting operation. Young boys from the nearby hutments were invited to take whatever they wanted from the shop. This distribution continued for at least an hour. Perhaps this is the Congress (I) way of



A widow with her baby in Farash Bazar camp

— Madhu

implementing their version of socialism. In fact, some Trilokpuri residents reported that they were invited to join the looting operations which were christened the "*Garibi Hatao*" campaign.

The way party stalwarts chose to pay tribute to Mrs Gandhi and mourn her death during those four days brought out blatantly what the ruling party has been reduced to. Many of the leaders behaved as though they were leaders of a gang rather than prominent members of a national political party. It was as though their chief gang leader had been killed and they wanted to terrorise those who they imagined constituted a threatening rival gang. Since there was really no rival gang at hand, they substituted for it all Sikhs with long hair and beards. These men, they decided, were a threat to their being considered the top gangsters, so terrorising the former would show who still had real power. A popular explanation of prominent Congressmen's involvement that we heard was "*Takat ajma rahe thay*" (They were testing out and proving their strength).

Neighbourhood Help And Defence Efforts

One of the most positive things that happened during those dark days in Delhi was the spontaneous emergence of defence and peace committees in most colonies and marketplaces. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and other communities jointly organised to defend their neighbourhoods from attack by outsiders. In many colonies, potential trouble makers were chased away and active resistance was offered to the mobs who tried to enter the areas. Men barricaded the streets and patrolled the neighbourhoods all night.

During the days and nights when the government machinery voluntarily chose to become defunct, people organised themselves irrespective of caste or religion. These committees seem to have been more effective in areas inhabited by relatively better off and more organised communities who had more resources at their command. In the very poor areas, where people have

been dumped together in appalling conditions, and the communities are not as well organised internally, people could not organise effective self defence.

In all areas, however, there were numerous instances of immediate neighbours, who were non Sikhs, sheltering Sikhs. For instance, Surinder Kaur of Trilokpuri described how her family was saved by a Hindu neighbour. She locked her son inside the house and came out with her daughter. The attackers threw hundreds of bricks at her house and broke everything. The neighbours came and saved them even under such risky circumstances. One neighbour stood in front of the door to prevent the house being broken open.

In most places where the residents were predominantly non Sikhs with a small sprinkling of Sikh houses, after the initial surprise attack on the first day, Hindus and Muslims did organise to protect the Sikhs. Many families narrated how they were given shelter by neighbours who took great risks in doing so. Even in Trilokpuri, the damage to Sikh life and property was much greater where they were concentrated together, as in blocks 30 and 32, than where they lived interspersed with people of other communities.

Shan Kaur of Shahdara was given shelter by Musalmans who escorted her and her children to a place of safety. A Hindu family in Shakurpur saved three families by hiding them, masking their identity and helping them to run away in rickshaws. In many cases, after Sikh men were killed or forced to flee to save their lives, women and children continued to stay with their neighbours.

A Sikh family which had recently shifted to a middle class colony, Dilshad Garden, beyond the Yamuna, said that even though there were many killings, burnings and lootings all around, they were kept in a protective cocoon by their neighbours who brought them everything they needed so as to save them from having to step out of the house. When the city was facing severe shortage of milk, they

had more than enough. Many Hindu families also kept in safe custody the valuables such as cars, jewellery, cash, videos and other expensive items belonging to their Sikh friends and neighbours.

Mahinder Kaur narrates how some of the Muslim neighbours from her mother's locality came to rescue her and her brother's family from another colony. She herself lives in Nand Nagri with her husband and three children but had gone to visit her brother at Yamuna Vihar. There were three men, two women and five children in the house on the 1st when, at about 9 a.m., a mob of about 500 came and began to stone the house. The family locked themselves in, and hid. Their neighbours, in an attempt to save them, told the mob that the house was empty since the Sikh family had escaped the previous night. The mob went ahead and burnt the nearby *gurudwara* as well as dozens of Sikh homes in the locality. Some of their neighbours then came to talk to them and advised them to escape since the mob had gone away for a while. They were afraid to travel along the roads while the mob was still on the rampage. But the neighbours clearly told them that they would not shelter the Sikh men. So they decided to stay hidden together in their house. At 3 a.m., however, a group of Muslim men came to their house to rescue them. These were neighbours of Mahinder Kaur's mother who lives in Jafrabad, a trans Yamuna village which has a predominantly Muslim population. These men had brought several *burkaks* with them. The three Sikh men and the two boys were dressed in women's clothes, covered with *burkaks* and taken to Jafrabad where they remained safely till the relief camps came into existence. Had they not been rescued at that juncture it would have meant certain death because the mob returned at 5 p.m., broke open the door and searched the house to see if anyone was hiding. They looted some of the stuff but were dissuaded by the neighbours from setting fire to the house. Mahinder

Kaur says the Muslims of that locality had similarly rescued dozens of Sikh men and kept them in their houses for several days.

The Help Offered Was Not Enough

However, in many cases, the neighbours were not willing to take the risk involved. In many cases, the families initially gave shelter, but as soon as the mob began to approach, the Sikhs, especially the men, were asked to leave on the plea that the sheltering family would otherwise be placed in danger. This amounted to handing over these men for murder to the mobs because once they came out, with the mob all around, there was no possibility of escape.

After attacking and killing all the Sikh men they could lay their hands on, the mob left and came back again in hordes and insisted on searching every house, including those of people of other communities, to see if any Sikhs had taken refuge there. Anyone they found hiding was slaughtered. Sometimes, they broke down the roofs of victims' houses to ensure that people hiding inside would be crushed to death.

The fact that people of different communities did come to the rescue of Sikh neighbours was perhaps the only hopeful sign in an otherwise nightmarish situation. Yet the help offered was not enough. While many helped neighbours to hide and escape surreptitiously, not enough Hindus or others came forward in an organised way and openly resisted mob fury.

There is evidence that wherever even a small number of determined individuals came forward, they were able to stop even big mobs from running amok. For instance, in Yusuf Sarai market, which is only about a furlong away from AIIMS, from where the killing spread on the 31st, the local shopkeepers organised very brave resistance. A mob came and set fire to the *gurdwara*. They were about to attack Sikh shops next. The Hindu shopkeepers came and lay down in front of the shops and told the mob they would have to burn them before they burnt the shops. Not a single

shop was burnt or looted in this area, then or afterwards.

Similarly, a friend went and rescued a Sikh colleague from his house in a riot affected neighbourhood in broad daylight on November 1, and brought him to his own house on his motorbike. Some of the neighbours threw stones at them but did not proceed to further violence when this failed to intimidate the rescuer. Even in a highly disturbed area like Punjabi Bagh, an old woman and a 60 year old man successfully prevented a mob from setting fire to a house. A couple of rioters threw petrol balls into the house but the rescuers mobilised help from the locality to extinguish the fire, and persuaded the mob to leave.

In rare cases, those non Sikhs who tried to come forward and remonstrate with the mob did get beaten up, some few were even killed. But on the whole, those who stood their ground were able to save that particular situation.

Many neighbours allowed Sikh women to seek refuge but refused to shelter men. Somti Bai of Trilokpuri says she and her family hid in the house of a local political leader. While he kept assuring her that her three sons were safe in the house, he subsequently turned them out of the house, which was as good as handing them over to the mob, which was on the rampage all around. All three sons were killed. Somti's sister-in-law was raped. Her two sisters were kidnapped and released only after three days had passed.

Another horrible but typical example of callous cowardliness of neighbours was reported by an eyewitness in Shankar Garden, a middle class colony newly established in West Delhi. A mob attacked a Sikh house, pulled out an old man and set his clothes on fire. He ran into the house of a neighbour who helped him get off the clothes and extinguish the fire. But the mob soon began to pelt this house with stones. The family there folded their hands before the elderly Sikh and asked him to leave by the back door because they were not ready to risk further attack. As

soon as the Sikh emerged, the mob encircled him. They seemed to be in no hurry for they spent about 20 minutes collecting stones. They then formed a circle round him and began stoning him to death. At this, his young son came running out of the house to save his father, who was by then half dead. The mob immediately pounced on the son, tied his arms and legs, poured kerosene on him and burnt him to death.

This entire incident, from beginning to end, was watched by hundreds of neighbours standing in their courtyards or on roof tops, yet no one had the courage or humanity to intervene. The old man was crying for water but no one came forward even to meet this need because the attackers stood around in threatening postures.

Several such instances have been reported where determined intervention by neighbours and onlookers could have averted killings. Not only did people fail to intervene. They seem to have watched with the same mixture of fascination and repulsion with which viewers watch violence on the cinema screen.

All For The Glory And Unity Of The Nation

Unfortunately, an overwhelming majority of people in Delhi seem to feel that all the killings and arson were, in some way, justifiable. They believe this not just because they are possessed by the desire for revenge for the murder of Indira Gandhi but because they have been convinced by years of vicious chauvinist propaganda that a purging operation was necessary in order to "save the nation" and "keep the nation united." The ruling party has made itself the arch symbol of a so called united nation. Its opponents are invariably accused of "weakening the nation" in the face of the dangers of the "foreign hand."

Once such a chauvinist, nationalist fever infects the brains of people there is little hope that rationality or humanity or logic will prevail. The vision of the nation begins to act as a monster devouring its own people.

The amazing thing is that many of those who witnessed with their own eyes such senseless murders, who may feel sorry about their neighbours' and friends' deaths, who may even have helped and sheltered Sikhs, in fact a majority of the people of Delhi, still continue to assert with unabated vigour that the Sikhs had to be "taught a lesson." The bizarre logic or rather illogic behind this sentiment is most difficult to challenge. As long as people thought in concrete terms of Sikhs they knew personally, they felt that these individuals should be protected and that attacks on them were regrettable. But the moment they began to think of themselves as members of the Hindu community or as nationalist and patriotic Indians (these two were usually seen as synonymous), their ability to see Sikhs as fellow human beings seemed to vanish. The transition from "Santokh Singh, our neighbour and friend" to "those Sikhs" was remarkably sudden, drastic and violent. Sikhs as Sikhs were "they" pillaged against "us." Sikhs became another species altogether, who needed to be sternly dealt with, perhaps even exterminated, for their "otherness."

Amongst the majority of Hindus, who did not join in the violence, there unfortunately seems to be a distinct feeling of pride that Hindus have finally put fear in the hearts of a supposedly aggressive community. At the same time, nobody wants to face the responsibility for the horrific deeds that were done in the name of teaching this lesson. This is especially so amongst middle class people. After asserting that the Sikhs had to be given a fitting reply, people at once seek shelter behind the comforting reflection that it was "these lower caste" poor people who did it, conveniently forgetting that the leaders who incited the mobs are from their own class. They are also quick to cite instances of how, in their own way, they tried to help their neighbours. Thus they betray a curious blend of pride in the mob actions which were done in the name of avenging Hindus, and shrinking from taking individual responsibility for the carnage.

The Complex Quality Of Concern

Also, in middle class colonies, other factors than mere undiluted concern for neighbours seem to have been at work to get them to offer help to some of their close neighbours. In the colonies of well off people, almost none of the local residents were key participants in mob activity. Almost always, the attackers descended from outside of the colony and were perceived as belonging to the lower castes and classes, who were making use of the opportunity to loot and plunder. Many people perceived it as some sort of class war.

Those middle and upper class colonies which adjoined villages and resettlement colonies seem to have been worst affected. The residents, therefore, fell prey to the fear that the selective looting of Sikh houses could spread to other houses. I heard residents of some of the affluent colonies say that the "*nich jatis*" had been eyeing the growing prosperity of the rich with increasing resentment and had grabbed this occasion to acquire consumer items that they could not otherwise hope to get throughout their lives.

The fear that if an adjoining house was burnt, the fire might spread or that the attackers might lose their sense of discrimination and loot non Sikh houses as well, seems to have spurred many more people into organising mutual defence.

Sadly, there are also reported cases of neighbours having helped the attacking mob to identify Sikh homes. A woman from Babarpur alleges that "a local ration shop owner brought the attackers to our house. We know him very well. We always had good relations with him. But he and his brother betrayed us. The killers were men from the interior alleys of our locality. They came around noon on the 1st. My son had been told to cut off his hair and had done so the night before. He had kept vigil all night with the other men of the neighbourhood. But the ration shop owner recognised him though his hair was cut and pointed him out, saying : 'He is a Sardar. Kill him.' The killers poured

kerosene on him and on my husband and burnt them both to death."

Yet it remains true that in most areas, immediate neighbours, on the whole, offered help, or at the very least, did not join the attackers. When local men joined the mob, or rejoiced with it, they were usually not immediate neighbours of the victims but were residents of a nearby block or street in the same locality.

Rumour As A Weapon

Even while people helped their neighbours and friends, ferocious rumours were set afloat to discourage people from offering such help. In Trilokpuri, as well as in other areas, several families who had given shelter to Sikh women told me obnoxious and unbelievable stories about Sikhs who were given shelter in Hindu homes having butchered their benefactors. There was also the absurd story of a barber who cut the hair of a Sikh at the latter's request but received sword blows on his ears and in his stomach as a parting gift. Such rumours were and are rife in every locality, from the affluent to the poverty stricken.

Unfortunately, this kind of rumourmongering goes on unabated even after the Sikhs have been subjected to such violence and terrorisation. During and after the carnage, there have been several rumours of how Sikhs have retaliated or are planning to retaliate, in and outside Punjab. The stories about water poisoning and trainloads of massacred Hindus, which ran like wild fire through the city, have been proved utterly baseless. But stories of how Sikhs are planning to revenge themselves are still doing incalculable damage. For instance, a domestic servant in our locality told us that the army had to be called into her colony because the residents were convinced that the Hindus were in imminent danger of an attack by the Sikhs who had sought shelter in Balasaheb *gurudwara* nearby. It was rumoured that 9,000 Sikhs, equipped with all kinds of arms, had gathered in the *gurudwara* and were ready to retaliate. However, the reality was that about 1,500 people, most of them

women and children, in a pitiable condition, were living in the *gurudwara* relief camp. The rumour also gave rise to a disgusting demand that the relief camp in the *gurudwara* be disbanded because Sikhs were congregated in large numbers there.

Thus these rumours have become not only a way of justifying the monstrous happenings which have no real justification, but also a weapon that is used with telling effect against the victims.

Women Excluded From Defence Efforts

All the killing, looting and burning was organised by men. In some cases, after the initial attack was over, women and children also joined in picking up whatever they could lay hands on by way of loot. At Punjabi Bagh, for instance, men, women and children from J. J. Colony, Madipur, came in swarms to claim their share of booty from the *gurudwara* and from some houses. But the attacking mob was exclusively composed of men.

The organised efforts at defence and peacekeeping were also confined almost exclusively to men. Women were meticulously kept out of these efforts in most areas. Men, as usual, ran the whole show by themselves. On television, when residents were interviewed, some women said the role they played was that of serving tea to the men who kept vigil all night.

In our neighbourhood, Lajpat Nagar, the first initiative to call a meeting of the residents was taken by the Residents' Association of the block, which is not a very active body in normal times. In this association, as in all such bodies, women are never approached to become even nominal members if there are any men in the household. A widow without grown sons may be asked to pay a membership fee in her own name, but will not be expected to attend meetings or to take an active interest in the doings or nondoings of the association. Since I happen to be one of the few women who has no male "head of the household", I was enrolled as a member in my own right.



Outside her wrecked home

Yet, though I approached the office bearers to find out if a meeting was being called and to ensure that I was informed so that I could attend, neither I nor any other woman was allowed to be part of the neighbourhood meetings and deliberations. Men took for granted that it was their job to defend the area. Women were expected to run inside their homes if an attack occurred.

At night, young men patrolled the streets, and made rather aggressive enquiries of any women they saw walking around at a late hour. They were on the ready with *lathis*, iron bars and other weapons. The way they went about their business, it was difficult to distinguish these night patrollers from trouble makers. In fact, in a few places, including parts of Lajpat Nagar, different patrolling parties clashed with each other, mistaking each other for hoodlums.

For many young men, this seemed an exciting opportunity to prove their filmi heroism. Some of them seemed to have a good time creating false alarms, spreading

rumours, running around with sticks and rods at the slightest provocation—real or imagined. Observing the aggressive behaviour of some of the young men in our locality, I had the uneasy feeling that their very presence on the road was likely to spark off a clash, with or without reason.

Women in our locality and in most other areas of the city, acted merely as carriers of rumours that their sons, husbands and brothers brought in from outside. None of the men thought it necessary to involve women in the effort at self defence nor were there any instances of women taking the initiative to organise their own meetings to discuss what they should do in case of an emergency.

At the same time, in many Sikh households, because of the danger to men's lives, most of the outside chores had to be performed by women. Within most homes, of course, women did participate in discussions as to what the family should do if something went wrong. But this was not allowed to happen at the community level.

Women were, however, active in relief work. Students and teachers of women's colleges in Delhi have been particularly active in organising relief teams. Even here, however, authorities in some colleges have tried to put hurdles in the students' way. For instance, in Miranda House and University Hostel for Women, rules regarding visitors' entry into the premises and residents' comings and goings have been made more stringent. Thus, women students have even less freedom than in ordinary times to go out of the premises and this restricts their ability to be active in relief work. Girls have been repeatedly warned against the supposed dangers of relief work. Residents of the University Hostel were even forbidden to join the Delhi University peace marches on the campus.

The experience of these days again confirmed the fact that people's preconceptions seem to determine and influence their thinking much more than the reality of the situation and of their

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experience. For instance, whenever communities were attacked, men seemed quite incapable of defending their homes all by themselves. In most cases, women did come forward to protect not only their homes and children but also the lives of men. Most of the men seem to have been forced to flee to save their lives, leaving women to take care of the children, the old and the home. This has been the standard experience everywhere—in Assam, in Bihar tribal movements, during the partition, during various riots and so on. Yet the myth holds powerful sway that men alone are defenders of the community and that women are incapable of performing this task.

The powerful hold of this myth prevents women from acquiring any say in key decision making processes, even in those which affect their lives as profoundly as they do those of men.

The Role Of Government Machinery

In one sense, this was not an unusual period. The entire government machinery seems to have lived up to its usual motto : “Do not move or do anything until there is a push and a kick from above. If you do something you are more likely to annoy someone in power than if you do not do anything.”

This is summed up very aptly by N.K. Saxena, a senior police officer quoted in the November 25 issue of *Express Magazine* : “I have no doubt that a good few police officers make dangerous compromises because, according to their calculations, the risk of their dismissal for failure is not more than one percent, while their being disgraced for doing their duty seriously is over 50 percent.”

A striking example of this safe non-doing was the way All India Radio handled the news of Mrs Gandhi’s death. They were the last to announce her death, and kept playing their routine jazz and film music hours after BBC and several other foreign radio stations had announced the news and had started broadcasting condolence messages from different world leaders. It

was a typical display of mindless servility and slavish self censorship, characteristic of the government owned media in India.

While the city burned, many senior politicians, bureaucrats and police officers seem to have spent most of their time dancing attendance at Teen Murti house where Mrs Gandhi’s body lay, or preparing to receive foreign dignitaries for the grand funeral. Others were busy helping to coordinate the murder, rape and plunder.

Role Of Police

Almost everywhere in the city, the police too seem to have performed a well rehearsed role. Either they were absent from the scene and failed to make their appearance despite repeated appeals from affected and concerned citizens or, if they were present, they behaved at best like

between his going off duty and the next man’s coming to replace him, there would be an interval of at least 15 minutes, in which the job could be done. However, the ‘leader’ was not convinced and said: ‘Look, we have the men now. We can’t wait. Besides, we know you. Who knows who the next fellow maybe?’ So saying, he put his arm around the policeman and walked him down the road for a few hundred yards, during which time the rest of the miscreants set ‘the *gurudwara* ablaze.”

The PUCL-PUDR report describes similar experiences : “On November 1, when we toured the Lajpat Nagar area, we found the police conspicuous by their absence, while Sikh shops were being set on fire and looted. Young people armed



— Statesman

Policemen act as disinterested spectators

amused spectators. In many cases, they actively abetted the criminal acts, and in some cases, even participated in them.

A friend who witnessed the burning of Yusuf Sarai *gurudwara* described the role of the police: “Between 3 and 4 p.m., on November 1, a local hoodlum came to the policeman on duty and said : ‘Please go away from here, we want to burn the *gurudwara*.’ The policeman good humouredly replied : Wait for a while till I go off duty. Then you can burn it. In fact, you should burn it.’ He assured him that

with swords, dappers, spears, steel *trishuls* and iron rods were ruling the roads. The only sign of police presence was a police jeep, which obstructed a peace procession brought out by a few concerned citizens. When the procession was on its way to the Lajpat Nagar main market, a police inspector from the van stopped the procession and warned it not to proceed, reminding its members that the city was under curfew and Section 144. When leaders of the procession wanted to know why the arsonists and rioters were

not being dispersed if curfew was on, he gave no reply and warned instead that the processionists could go to Lajpat Nagar market at their own risk."

Even in our own locality, after the *gurudwara* was set on fire, the policemen looked on with amusement as though it were a *tamasha* and did nothing to stop the hoodlums. When we tried to persuade local residents that we should try to put out the fire, the policemen accused us of creating a "disturbance" and tried to push us away. Elsewhere, too, the same story is told.

Even for those who wish to believe that there were no explicit orders to this effect from high up police bosses, the role that the policemen at the lower levels played would still need to be explained. The least one would have to say is that since the policemen knew that several Congress (I) men were fomenting the riots, they did not want to take the responsibility of stopping it lest they incur the wrath of their senior officers and the ruling party bosses. Hence they may have decided to adopt a safer course and do nothing obstructive.

However, since traditionally there is a close link up between the politician cum ruffian and the local police, even if there were no explicit orders from above to this effect, the two are likely to have acted in unison. And since there was promise of loot and plunder, the arsonists found ready allies among the police. Several people have alleged that a substantial portion of the looted property was cornered by policemen.

Sardar Santokh Singh, who lives in Shivpuri Extension, says: "No police came to our rescue when we were attacked on November 2, even though the place where we live is a stone's throw from the police station." No first information report (F.I.R) had been registered even though they, along with many others, came and sought shelter in the police station after it was converted into a relief camp by the government.

Several of the families I interviewed had been denied protection and shelter when

they somehow managed to reach a police station. For instance, Shan Kaur and her daughter managed to reach the Seelampur police station after the male members of their family were murdered. But she says that the police threw them out and they then sought refuge in the house of Hindu relatives. She says that in her colony some murders took place right in front of the police station.

Sardar Mahinder Singh of Shanker Nagar, who works as a *granthi* in a *gurudwara*, describes how his family fared; "On November 3, at about 4.30 p.m., the military came and asked if people wanted to be taken to relief camps. So all those who were in hiding came out. One truckload left for the camp. Just as the others were preparing to get into the next truck, the military drove it away empty, saying: 'We have some urgent work nearby, so we will come back for you.' No sooner had the military left than the mob fired on the families who were now standing exposed on the street. One Sardar died. There was a stampede, with people rushing to hide and being pursued. My brother-in-law and my young son ran into the house and tried to hide. The attackers pursued them and broke down the door. The two of them climbed on the roof of a Hindu neighbour's house but they were dragged down and hit with *lathis* and bricks. Immediately, petrol was poured on them and they were burnt alive. My wife tried to save them and got badly burnt. Everything in our house was looted though the neighbours somehow managed to save the house from being burnt."

In Krishna Nagar, 12 members of a family were burnt alive in their own house without any intervention by the police even though the police station is a few yards away. One of the men tried to escape but he was hit with iron rods and thrown back into the burning house. A woman too tried to escape but was already so badly burnt that she died, soon after, in hospital.

There were instances, however, of the police coming to disarm Sikhs who tried to resist attackers, using whatever arms they

had. Thus police deprived them of their legal right to private self defence. Those actions to disarm Sikhs were among the very few active interventions by the police, ostensibly to preserve law and order. More Sikhs died as a consequence of this type of police intervention than would have, had the police just kept away.

Bindo from Kalyanpuri says that the SHO of the area ordered the police to loot Sikh houses. Those who resisted were arrested. Police raided Sikh houses instead of protecting them. In other blocks in this colony, people alleged that the SHO had accompanied the attacking mob and provided them with diesel from police jeeps for burning Sikh men alive.

Several cases have been reported of Hindus who had sheltered Sikhs having gone to seek help from the police and having been told to hand over the Sikhs to the mobs. An eyewitness in Shakurpur says a Sikh man who was being pursued by a mob attempted to save his life by climbing into a police jeep. He was thrown by the police to the mob who killed him on the spot.

An additional reason for police inaction in this instance is believed to be that Sikh policemen were deliberately immobilised. One version is that the Delhi police were officially informed of Mrs. Gandhi's death only at 5 p.m. even though she had died much before noon. The two DIGs spent the whole night disarming that large proportion of the Delhi police force who are Sikhs. They were taken off duty. Even in the army, some Sikh soldiers are said to have been disarmed.

Thus, not only was precious time lost which should have been spent keeping the criminals in check, but also, Sikh policemen, who could have helped keep the situation somewhat under control, were gotten rid of. Thus, in many respects the murderers, looters and arsonists had a free hand and could act with greater assurance that no one would block their way.

Frying Pan To Fire ?

It seems we are fast reaching a state of

gangster police combined rule. After the assassination and riots, the government made several announcements about its plans to overhaul the prime minister's security force and also to open many more police stations in the city, and strengthen and expand the police force. This seems like rubbing salt into our wounds.

It is a well known fact that not only during these riots but in almost all other similar situations the police have either actively assisted criminals or at the least, have turned a blind eye to their activities. One of the reasons for this is that the political bosses who control the police are also the ones who extend patronage to ruffians and criminals. Most people argue that what we need is a smaller but honest police force and non interference by political leaders. How this can be achieved nobody yet knows. At least, I have never heard anything but pious sermons on this issue, to which neither police nor politicians feel the need to pay heed.

Expanding the police force by adding 8,000 or more to the existing 32,000 in the city, as the government has announced, without reorganising it and making it responsible to the people residing in the local communities it is suppose to protect, is like adding to the problem rather than solving it. It amounts to injecting more poison into the social life of the country.

The Coming Of The Army

Though the press, All India Radio and Doordarshan reported that shoot at sight orders had been issued and the army had been called in to enforce the curfew on November 1, following large scale violence, the troops in the field were not given firm and clear instructions to move independently to put down the riots. The police and the civil administration failed to provide accurate information to the troops deployed in the city, especially during the crucial first few days.

There were hardly any instances during the few days of the riots of the army having fired on mobs of attackers or having come to the rescue of victims while they were under attack. Many officers in the field

seemed unsure of their orders and were reluctant to order their troops into action without the concurrence of the police and civil authorities, both of whom seemed reluctant to cede authority to act to the military. There seems to have been a deliberate plan to keep the army ineffective until the murderers and arsonists had done their job.

The coming of the army to maintain law and order in the city was welcomed by almost everyone. Many even openly declared that they wanted military rule. This is indeed a sad comment on the state of our society. People themselves are demanding more and more military interventions in the mistaken hope that the

Bangladesh, close neighbours. Both countries have had long spells of army rule, and in matters of corruption and disorder, are perhaps worse off. Yet the myth persists that the army can best perform the people's task because we have not had as much exposure to army rule as we have had to our police and politicians, except for a few days in times of crisis. Another face of army rule is visible in certain border areas in India, where, for a long time, the army has been doing exactly what the police is notorious for doing in most parts of the country.

The Nature Of Government Relief

Even though it is well known that key members of the Congress (I) party led and



Indian Express

A family arriving at Shahdara relief camp

army is "above politics" and hence will clean up the corrupt administration.

The conduct of our politicians and bureaucrats is such that democracy has unfortunately become synonymous with corruption and ruffianism. Hence, too frequently, the desire for a well ordered society seeks expression, tragically, in the desire for army rule.

Is this because people see army rule as rule by a caste apart from the rest of the people? Are they really as incorruptible as some of us hope?

We have the examples of Pakistan and

instigated the riots and much of the governmental machinery slavishly collaborated with the rioters, the same crew have now entrusted themselves with the task of doing relief and rehabilitation work. The attitude displayed is that of pious bountifulness vis a vis the poor helpless victims, as though some natural disaster had befallen them.

It is tragic indeed that several petitions and memoranda have to be submitted by concerned citizens and organisations to the very same authorities who are directly or indirectly responsible for the massacre.

For instance, a letter signed by several organisations was sent to Rajiv Gandhi asking that special reliefs be made available for widows, and women who have lost all the male members of their families. There have been similar requests for enhancing the compensation money for each death. The whole tone of the letter is one of asking a favour.

Whenever there have been discussions between voluntary organisations involved in relief and the government representatives, the latter behave as though they are bestowing charity on a group of people who have no rightful claim on government.

This attitude is evident also in the half hearted and haphazard way relief camps were started by the government. From November 4 onwards, as things began to calm down, the army was assigned the task of keeping peace in the city. People who had been rendered houseless or felt too

provided by government, not to mention medical or other relief, such as blankets and clothing. For the first few days, people from neighbouring areas, both Hindus and Sikhs, brought food for the victims. For instance, in Farash Bazar camp, people from Jhilmil Colony organised a *langar* for the victim families because the government had not made any food arrangements and many of the victims had not eaten for the days they had been in hiding.

Even when the government did begin to send in food and other supplies, it sent them only to the 10 camps which the Delhi administration chose to "recognise." About 20 other camps, most of them set up in *gurudwaras* were not recognised by government and therefore received scarcely any material help from government.

The Sikh community, with help from voluntary organisations, arranged food

formed in response to the situation, tried their best to fill the gap. They collected donations, food supplies, old clothes, medicines and other items. A few doctors joined these relief teams. In some camps, government machinery began to put obstacles in the path of voluntary organisations and insisted on issuing identity cards to people before letting them enter the camps. However, this plan could not be implemented.

As the voluntary organisations began to assess and grasp the magnitude of the problem, government announced its plans to fold up the camps on the plea that the situation had returned to "normal." Government insisted that people return to their "homes" so that the process of rehabilitation could be expedited.

Many people whose houses had been completely destroyed were similarly packed on to buses and sent off. Mahinder Kaur, whose flat in Nand Nagri had been completely looted and damaged, and who was left with no source of income since her husband's teashop and her knitting machine were both destroyed, was forced out of the camp in Shyamlal College, Shahdara. On November 11, a day before the university opened, she says, inmates of this camp, which was one of the largest in Delhi, were forced out. When they manifested reluctance, they were told: "If you do not go you will be thrown out" (*dhakke mar ke nikalenge*). In Kalyanpuri and Shakurpur people are living in the open near their wrecked homes.

It was around November 6 that government declared its intention of winding up the camps. This was the time when people were still coming into the camps and most of those who were there categorically stated that they would rather die than return to the areas where they had seen their relatives slaughtered and where degradation had been heaped upon them. The common feeling is: "That place has become a cremation ground for us." Those who lived in somewhat safer localities returned on their own without any prodding from government. It is primarily



In the Farash Bazar relief camp

insecure in their own neighbourhoods moved into relief camps set up in different parts of the city, some by government but mostly by *gurudwara*. As usual, government was slow and callous in meeting with the demands of the situation.

In the early days, even though people were dumped in police stations, colleges and school buildings that had been hastily converted into relief centres, food was not

and other supplies for these camps. Even in the 10 recognised camps, however, government food supplies are so poorly distributed and frequently inadequate so that voluntary organisations have had to continue supplying food, clothing and other necessities such as blankets, soap, utensils, buckets, on a regular basis.

Several voluntary organisations such as the Nagrik Ekta Manch, which was

the poorer families from resettlement colonies where even local people and some neighbours had joined in the looting and killing, who are not prepared to go back.

In order to preempt any government move to throw out vulnerable and shelterless people on to the streets, Nagrik Ekta Manch was forced to approach the High Court and demand that government be disallowed from closing down the camps until satisfactory arrangements were made for the safety of the affected families. The High Court granted a stay order on November 16, and on November 19 made the government give an assurance that no further evacuation would take place against the will of the evacuees. However, by then, almost all the government run camps had been emptied, except for the Farash Bazar camp.

The political considerations behind the desire to evacuate people are obvious. First, as long as people stay together in the camps, they remain visible as victims of riots and of the collusion and failure of government machinery during this period. This is obviously too big an embarrassment with the elections round the corner. Second, as long as people live together, they inevitably have a certain measure of solidarity. This gives them a relatively stronger bargaining position in demanding compensation and relief. Third, as long as they live together, it is easier for voluntary agencies and concerned individuals to monitor the compensation process and to make sure that the money actually reaches those for whom it is meant and is not misappropriated by the disbursement agents or local leaders and hoodlums. Those families who were made to go back when the camps folded are now scattered and more completely at the mercy of callous governmental machinery and of the Congress hoodlums who are playing an active role in distributing compensation money.

Fourth, those families who were compelled to go back will be forced to make their homes habitable by removing the

wreckage and thus will be made to destroy the evidence of the carnage and loot. Government has not yet taken the trouble to begin collecting evidence on a systematic basis or even assessing the total economic damage caused to individual families. Nor is there any hope of such a process commencing.

Fifth, once people are back in their colonies, they are likely to be intimidated into silence so that they do not follow up criminal charges or give witness against the attackers. The problem is most acute for the relatively poorer set of victims from resettlement colonies. The bulk of people who stayed in refugee camps for more than a few days came from these colonies. Most better off people took shelter with friends, relatives, or in privately arranged places. Had there been any attempt by government to record the statements of the victims while they were still in camps, it would have been far easier to get testimony, as these people have been freely talking to press reporters and other investigators. When I interviewed people in the camps, except for some women who had been gang raped, not one person showed any unwillingness to tell his or her story. They were willing to be taperecorded, photographed, and also openly to identify all those whom they knew to be abettors and perpetrators of crimes, however high up or powerful these people were. Once forced to go back to the areas where murderers and ruffians still roam around freely, the victims are not likely to be able to testify openly. Not that any effort to record statements is likely to be made by government at any point since the carnage was mostly government's own doing.

Very little has been done to curb the elements which were behind the riots. It has been reported that even when police have been forced to make some show of arrests and recovery of looted property, most of the arrests were made on petty charges which do not carry any serious penalty. A majority of arrests were made under section 107 of the penal code. A

person apprehended under this section can at most be ordered to execute a bond for keeping the peace and public tranquility for a period not exceeding one year.

Moreover, since Congress (I) leaders are known to have instigated the rioters, the hoodlums are assured of political protection. In some cases, Congress (I) leaders have actually gone to police stations and insisted on their followers being immediately released. The best known example is that of Congress (I) leader, Dharam Das Shastri, who was reported to have openly intimidated the SHO who had ordered the arrest of some criminal rioters. Many of the leaders are known to be doing the same, some of them through less visible pressures. Even the few rioters who were arrested have been released on bail within a day or two and are known to be openly intimidating the victimised families in their areas.

Despite pressure from large sections of the public, government has not ordered a full enquiry into the origin of the riots. In fact, government is making a shameless attempt to dismiss the violence as an inevitable outburst of people's natural frustration, grief and anger. The Congress (I) party has come back to fight the next election, posing as the arch defender of national unity. This has led several prominent citizens to appoint an independent enquiry commission to go into the causes of the riots. But the question is how does a commission lacking any enforcement authority put the government and the ruling party on public trial for its criminal conduct.

Monetary Compensation

The amount of relief and compensation promised is so low as to be absurd. The government has announced a Rs 10,000 compensation for each person killed. Since most of those killed were main breadwinners of their families, the money promised is ridiculously inadequate. When people have tried to point out the inadequacy, government representatives declare that any larger amount would set a "bad precedent," since victims of floods



— Madhu

Vidya, a widow, with her three children, and the fourth, a baby born on November 8 in the relief camp

and other natural disasters are given much smaller amounts. The procedures for getting even this meagre sum are so cumbersome that most people, particularly the illiterate and the poor, have no hope of ever obtaining it. The most problematic procedure is that a death has to be "proved." Considering the circumstances under which people were murdered, burnt to ashes and their remains lost amidst the wreckage, this is a cruel demand indeed.

The official figure for deaths in Delhi is set at about 600 whereas the actual number of deaths is likely to be much over 2, 500. Government is trying its utmost not to have to pay for all the deaths because if it acknowledges more claims this amounts to admitting the extent of the tragedy and of its own hypocrisy.

For damages to a house, the government is paying about Rs 1,000. The upper limit of compensation for property is Rs10,000. Even those who had every single item they owned burnt and their house and vehicles destroyed cannot get more than this. Even this meagre payment is being made in the most dishonest manner and many of the disbursement agents are taking bribes. Very, very few of those who filled out claim forms have been given the full amount of Rs 10,000.

For instance, in Farash Bazar camp, where people from Trilokpuri, who were

among the worst sufferers in Delhi, had sought shelter, there were 243 death claims, 515 house and property claims and 113 injury claims. On November 19, government officials brought only 31 cheques to be disbursed. Out of these, one was for Rs 10,000, one for Rs 5,000 and 29 were for Rs 1,000 each. The people were so angry that no one accepted the cheques and the officer was asked to go back. Similar or worse things have been happening in other areas.

In despair at government inactivity, some voluntary organisations and private business houses were impelled to undertake the task of repairing and rebuilding houses in some of the poorer areas, a task which government should have undertaken as a priority.

When people were made to leave the camps, they were supposed to be given Rs 50 and a week's rations per family. Many did not get even this paltry amount. In some cases, people were so angry with the government for its role in instigating the riots that when they reached the camps they refused to eat food supplied by the government or the ruling party. They would only accept help from *gurudwaras*, voluntary agencies or local residents who had spontaneously organised relief.

Thus, even though on paper several

lakhs of rupees will be shown to have been spent in providing relief and rehabilitation, very little of even this amount is likely to reach the people whom it should reach. This will provide another opportunity to the bureaucracy and the Congress party to bungle and misappropriate funds.

Ever since relief camps have been disbanded, voluntary agencies have found it more difficult to provide support and relief because the victims are scattered now. Relief workers have found that because the colonies where most of the victims live are places where the city poor are concentrated, the job of relief becomes more difficult. Many poor families flock to the volunteers and ask for help, even though they are not riot victims. If they are denied what they ask, fresh grounds for resentment and hostility against the survivors are created.

Most people feel that the little that is being done or promised by way of relief and rehabilitation by the government is essentially a way of creating a favourable atmosphere for the ruling party in the forthcoming elections, and that as soon as the elections are over, all aid to the victimised families will terminate. Considering the government's past record, this apprehension is by no means unjustified.

What Do We Do ?

One's first response to the enormity of what has happened is to feel a sense of absolute loss and despair. Even though the political instigation from within the ruling party played a very crucial role we cannot escape facing the fact that the poison that erupted flows in the very bloodstream of our social and political life. This has frightful implications. The most significant is that we are being ruled by a deadly alliance of ruffians and politicians, and all other groups have abdicated responsibility. Equally frightening is the passivity with which even the supposedly most enlightened and educated of our citizens have accepted the massacre as a minor aberration in normal life. As the

election fever heightens, those terrible events are fast receding from everyone's awareness.

However, if we do not learn and act on a few of the basic lessons that emerge so clearly from these tragic events, we will not be able to avert still larger catastrophes.

We must realise that what was done to the Sikhs can at any moment be done to any group of people. All it needs is a bunch of powerful politicians who, for some vested interest or other, decide to make a scapegoat of any identifiable group in the country. This has been done to Muslims for decades.

Lower caste and so called untouchable people have repeatedly been made victims of mass murder, rape, arson, in rural areas. The pace of such attacks has escalated in recent years. Such attacks by upper caste landlords and their hoodlums, with the complicity of police, have not aroused much public outrage. Violence seems to have become so much a part of "normal" life that people's sensibilities have been benumbed towards it.

Similarly, there is an old history of dubbing every radical opposition to the government as "Naxalite" or "antinational" and thus justifying extermination drives against political opponents by the state machinery and its hired hoodlums. This time, the Sikhs came to be chosen as special targets. Next, it could be virtually anyone.

We need to demand that :

1. All those who are responsible for the carnage be dealt with appropriately. The Congress (I) party and its chief office bearers who fomented violence and led the killings should be put on open trial and appropriately punished. Additionally, they should be made to pay reparations both from the party funds and from their individual wealth, for the heavy looting and damage to homes and other property of Sikh families. They should also pay heavy punitive fines for their criminal conduct, though of course no fines can

ever be a recompense for murder, rape, maiming and the other forms of terror that they unleashed.

2. A pension of Rs 500 a month should be given by the government to each widow and mother of deceased men. Along with this each child and dependent family member should be given Rs 100 per month till such time as the child reaches the age of 18.

3. The functioning of the various arms of the state machinery which actively connived with the arsonists or by their criminal neglect let the arsonists have a free hand for more than four days should also be subject to an independent inquest.. This includes the police and the civil administration.

Equally important is the long term need to devise ways whereby the police

defence efforts which sprang up during those days of crisis which succeeded in preventing the violence from spreading on a still larger scale. In many neighbourhoods, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs patrolled together and kept hoodlums at bay, even at the height of the incitements to communal massacre. We need to have the courage to learn the appropriate lesson from this experience namely, that this form of self organisation has a much greater potential for giving genuine protection to citizens than the police has ever had.

We need to recognise the urgent need for the people to take back for the community the power that has been appropriated by the ruffian-politician combine. We need to rebuild the institution of local self government. It is futile to expect protection from the



Victims at Kalyanpuri cooking collectively in an open space near their wrecked homes

— *Hindustan Times*

and the administration can be made accountable directly to each local community for what they do or fail to do.

4. Apart from curbing the arbitrary powers of the police and administration, in which abuse is inherent, we need to learn from the strength that lies in each community organising itself for its own defence and self determination. It has been widely acknowledged that more than the police or the army, it was the citizens' self

"higher" authorities because this only ends up rendering us powerless and servile.

We need to evolve newer forms of local self government at every level so that we do not have to live with a crippling sense of dependence on a highly corrupt, authoritarian and centralised state machinery.

5. It is equally important that women be actively involved in this process in

substantial numbers. The active presence of women in the community life has several advantages, one being that because of their relatively lesser capacity for and lack of a tradition of committing organised violence, the active presence of women on such committees will make the atmosphere far less conducive to violence.

6. These riots have highlighted with great urgency the role that wrong, bad and dishonest information plays in breeding hatred, violence and injustice. This has been true not only for these but for all communal riots. In the absence of good honest information, people are vulnerable to believing anything that is said with vigour and authority and repeated a hundred times.

Thus it becomes crucial to make honest information easily available and accessible on a very large scale. This task cannot be left to the government. It has to be undertaken by those who feel the need to build a more humane society. Prejudices feed on ignorance. We have to make a much greater and more concerted effort to collect systematically accurate and honest information, and to distribute it effectively in times of crisis and on a day to day basis.

7. These and other murderous campaigns such as anti Muslim riots in many parts of India, the ongoing repression in areas such as Assam and Nagaland, the chronic massacres and terrorisation of harijans, also highlight the inherent dangers in the kind of thinking that puts abstractisms above human life. The killing of Sikhs has been justified in the name of national unity just as Bhindranwale justified killing of people —Sikhs and Hindus—in the name of Sikhism or Sikh nationhood. Any ism, whether it is socialism, Gandhism, nationalism, Hinduism, or feminism, if it teaches us to kill, terrorise and subjugate human beings for some larger cause is a virtual death trap for people.

It also shows the danger of abstractions which hide human reality. People are often willing to stand by their neighbours because they see them as individual human



— Indian Express

People living in the open in Kalyanpuri, after their huts were destroyed

beings but the moment people are seen as Sikhs or Muslims or Hindus, stereotypic prejudices about communities take over and destroy the possibility of human relationships.

8. We need to combat the authoritarian thinking which permeates every aspect of our social and political life- from the family to the government. Any differences of opinion are seen as signs of rebellion and are sought to be put down with a heavy hand. We need to build a culture of tolerance and respect for differences of opinion, and an institutional framework wherein mutual cooperation is produced by common interests rather than by military and police coercion or appeals to a mystic idol called the nation.

A key aspect of relying on authoritarian thinking is the desire for simplistic, dogmatic solutions to all social problems. For example, there is a demand for more and more police and army intervention as one violent episode follows another. We need to remember that at no time in history and in no part of the world has the police or the army ever been able to inculcate a sense of fellow feeling or respect for other members of society. Wherever the police play a very active, dominant role and have relatively unlimited powers, they operate as upholders of

rulers who are more authoritarian and unjust. Therefore, we need to find other nonauthoritarian ways of dealing with violence, crime and differences of opinion amongst our people.

9. Even the hired murderous gangs were aware that if Hindus put themselves in their way in a determined manner and said : “We won’t allow you to go ahead with it”, they would have had to stop. Many Hindus did resist the murderers even at tremendous personal risk. By doing this they not only saved Sikh lives but also saved and asserted their own humanity.

This desire to be at peace with one’s own neighbours and feel a sense of responsibility for their well being and feel called upon to extend some help is one of the most hopeful things that has happened and we need further to strengthen and build upon it. This is something that does not happen uniformly in every society.

However, at the height of the massacres, this impulse remained largely limited to some neighbours and immediate friends of the attacked minority, acting as individuals or as a family. This impulse has to be spread so that our concern does not remain confined to our neighbourhood, family and friends. It has to gather strength from a common purpose and effort to see to it that these massacres are not repeated. □